Introduction

A ‘rise of supernatural fiction’? The idea appears paradoxical. Certainly it cannot refer to the place of the fantastic in the hierarchy of literary genres, more marginal than elevated. Its popular success has more often been described as a spread or even contagion than as a rise. This will not, then, be the chronicle of the ‘rise’ of a genre of ghost stories as a triumphal progress through time. What I will be discussing concerns less the career of an already recognisable category of fiction, than the conditions which made such a category possible; in other words, the subject under consideration is the emergence of the supernatural into fiction. For the now all-too-familiar repertoire of spectres, sorcerers, demons and vampires was not from the first unproblematically available as a resource for writers of fiction. Works like *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Monk*, today identified and dealt with by literary critics as early examples of the Gothic novel, as if that label were already securely in place at their time of writing, will here be seen as breakthroughs in the difficult overcoming of barriers to the fictional use of the marvellous.

The dates 1762 to 1800 given in the title mark the extent of a problematic. The period of the study properly begins two years before the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole. The highly publicised visitations of a ghost in the East End of London, the subject of chapter 1, was an event which for us illuminates the conditions of Walpole’s experiment. The varying responses provoked by the Cock Lane ghost represent both the summation of previous modes of writing and showing the supernatural, and the disclosure of new possibilities. The turn of the century marks the close of a decade which saw dramatic swings in the career of the literary supernatural, from latency to critical success to convergence with the unfolding narrative of contemporary politics; moments
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discussed in parts iii and iv. The year 1800 announces the end of one particular struggle over the boundaries of fictional representation and the beginning of an era of acceptance. The ever-increasing proliferation of supernatural fictions through the next two centuries still shows no signs of slackening in the last years of the twentieth century.

What the significance of that acceptance and this proliferation might be for the present time is a question I will address speculatively towards the end of the Introduction. But the question will remain implicit throughout the book in my treatment of historical material. On the one hand, a primary aim is to make apparent the otherness of the past by considering what was at stake in the exclusion of apparitions from works of literature, and their eventual inclusion, for the writers and readers of the eighteenth century. The debate over representation of the supernatural belongs to a historical horizon which is not immediately accessible to us, and which consequently brings us up against the limits of our own assumptions. On the other hand, the reconstructed meaning of this debate inevitably speaks to present concerns, and is understood by the process of identifying resemblances and origins: history has an effect. Acknowledgement of the alterity of the past enables, through dialogue, reflection on the nature of the present. This enquiry attempts to think together the two horizons of understanding, past and present, in the form of ‘effective history’.¹

THE GHOST STORY-TELLING CIRCLE

Incredulus odi,² to disbelieve is to dislike, might be taken as the motto of enlightenment faced with the spectacle of superstition. The attitude appears epitomised in an essay by Joseph Addison from the Spectator, no. 12 (14 March 1711). The taciturn but observant Mr Spectator has come to London and taken a room in the home of a widow on the strict condition that he is to be left entirely to himself:

I remember last Winter there were several young Girls of the Neighbourhood sitting about the Fire with my Landlady’s Daughters, and telling Stories of Spirits and Apparitions. Upon my opening the Door the young Women broke off their Discourse, but my Landlady’s Daughters telling them that it was no Body but the Gentleman (for that is the Name which I go by in the Neighbourhood, as well as in the Family) they went on without minding me. I seated myself by the Candle that stood on a Table at one end
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of the Room; and pretending to read a Book that I took out of my Pocket, heard several dreadful Stories of Ghosts as pale as Ashes that had stood at the Feet of a Bed, or walked over a Church-yard by Moon-light; and of others that had been conjured into the Red-Sea, for disturbing People’s rest, and drawing their Curtains at Midnight, with many other old Womens Fables of the like Nature. As one Spirit raised another, I observed that at the End of every Story the whole Company closed their Ranks and crowded about the Fire: I took Notice in particular of a little Boy, who was so attentive to every Story, that I am mistaken if he ventures to go to bed by himself this Twelvemonth. Indeed they talked so long, that the Imagination of the whole Assembly were manifestly crazed, and I am sure will be the worse for it as long as they live. I heard one of the Girls, that had looked upon me over her Shoulder, asking the Company how long I had been in the Room, and whether I did not look paler than I used to do. This put me under some Apprehension that I should be forced to explain my self if I did not retire; for which Reason I took the Candle into my Hand, and went up into my Chamber, not without wondering at the unaccountable Weakness in reasonable Creatures, that they should love to astonish and terrify one another.3

This is hostility to representations of the supernatural as we would expect to find it in the ‘Age of Reason’. Imagination, far from being the active faculty exalted by the Romantics, is understood as a passive medium for the imprint of external impressions, liable to be permanently disordered by the excessive input of improbabilities. The children’s taste for such horrors is an ‘unaccountable Weakness’. The implication is that it would be for the best if ghost stories could be withdrawn from circulation altogether.

Or is the case so predictable? For there is also the surreptitious involvement of the observer in the scene he condemns, hinted at with such subtle irony by Addison: a suggestion of identification with the attentive little boy, in the man apparently unable to tear himself away as story after story is recounted, whose pallor is remarked by another of the children, and who finally retreats rather sheepishly, unwilling – or unable? – to ‘explain himself’. Above all, there is the sense of physical contrast between the huddled group by the fire, and the solitary observer seated at a table, candle by his side, book in hand. There is an air of iconic significance to this juxtaposition. The group seems to represent an order of society which achieves cohesion through its myths, a circle bound and tightened by the shared sensations of fascination and terror. With each story it draws closer together, and shrinks further from the observer marooned in his pool of light. He, with his
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affectation of anonymity and unconvincing display of detached authority, suggests on the other hand the emptiness and isolation of rational judgement, a sentiment of loss (hardly remedied by the strange notion, which ends the essay, of a crowd of invisible ‘Spectators’ existing alongside the living and authorised by rational religion).

The imaging of superstition as a ghost story-telling circle is not unique to Addison, and I will be suggesting that it served for those who spoke from the position of enlightenment as an ambiguous figure of the break with the naive beliefs of the past, which in spite of their falsity formed a ground for consensus, and equally of their dissatisfaction with the relative incoherence of modern society.

In ‘Winter’ from The Seasons (1730–44), James Thomson presents the image of villagers gathered together indoors in snowy weather, exchanging tales of the supernatural.

\[
\text{\ldots the Village rouzes up the Fire;} \\
\text{While well attested, and as well believ'd;} \\
\text{Heard solemn, goes the Goblin-Story round;} \\
\text{Till superstitious Horror creeps o'er all.} \\
\]

(617–20)

Thomson insists on the credulity of the listeners, and the epithet ‘superstitious Horror’ might seem to indicate the unfavourable light in which the occasion is to be seen. Yet soon we are being guided to view this as a scene of natural community, when the circle of superstition, generically rural, is valorised to contrast with the artificial pastimes of the disenchanted city. In the city, at the theatre, in place of the rustic spectre, ‘the ghost of Hamlet stalks’ (line 646) and the anonymous crowd treats traditional beliefs as a source of artificial sensation.

William Collins’s ‘Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland, Considered as the Subject of Poetry’ (1749–50) moves beyond ambivalence to an open avowal of admiration for the ghost-story tradition and a clear desire to emulate it. The art of the story-teller has become the prototype of imaginative creation, and superstition is transmuted into a source of poetic inspiration. But the hapless London poet, disinherit by reason, can only bring himself to make use of these forbidden riches by the ruse of offering them up as suitable material for the writings of a friend, the addressee of the poem, Scottish-born and therefore closer to the remnants of the primitive in civilised Britain.
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Such airy beings awe the untutored swain:
Nor thou, though learned, his homelier thoughts neglect;
Let thy sweet muse the rural faith sustain:
These are the themes of simple, sure effect,
That add new conquests to her boundless reign,
And fill with double force her heart-commanding strain. (30–5)5

Collins here tentatively proposes the integration of the supernatural into the sphere of the aesthetic, and envisages the creation of a new story-telling circle which would consist of cultivated readers enabled, by taste, to reconcile themselves to the depiction of ghosts and goblins. A modern circle of aestheticised superstition would bear witness to the ‘boundless reign’ of aesthetic experience, its ability to transcend the narrow dictates of reason and unite a scattered and anonymous readership with the power of its ‘heart-commanding’ effect. But the prescription is implicit only; the sense of enlightenment prohibition is still strong enough to prevent the poet from preaching what he obliquely practises.

How could Collins have foreseen the happy marriage of supernaturalism and modernity satirised in a print by Gillray (fig. 1)? Dated 1802, it reflects several years of the frenzied production of modern supernatural fictions, and consciously parodies the conventional image of ‘rural faith’ in the form of four fashionable ladies who sit enthralled around a parlour table while one of them reads aloud from M. G. Lewis’s horror anthology, Tales of Wonder! The renovated circle of superstition has become a reality: it is determined by the rotations of fashion and commodity consumption. Ghost stories have been restored to universality by the improbable means of a commercial system of publishing and distribution. The unreality of these tales now goes without question; ‘poetic faith’, the voluntary suspension of disbelief, replaces ‘rural faith’. The dangers of credulity have been overtaken by the primary goal of provoking sensation.

SUPERNATURALISM AND CONSUMERISM

The rise of supernatural fictions must be understood in relation to the contemporary rise of consumerism, which has been described as the eighteenth-century ‘consumer revolution’.6 The craze for such fictions in the 1790s was made possible, of course, by the expansion of the reading public, and the devising of new methods for dis-
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tributing and marketing books. But the connection goes beyond this, to contemporary reflection on the nature and direction of modern society. The resistance to representations of the marvellous, with their illusory, irrational appeal, coincides with anxiety over the escalation of ‘unreal needs’.

‘Political economy’, J. G. A. Pocock has written, ‘is the dominant mode of Augustan political thought’, and within this mode the discourse of civic humanism set the terms of the critique of modernity in the eighteenth century. Civic humanism entailed support for an economy founded on the ‘real’ wealth of land, along with the conservative political programme this implies, and condemnation of finance capitalism, based on rumour and speculation, resulting in mushrooming profits and sudden deflations, and encouraging the spread of a luxury – excessive consumption – which would corrupt individuals and destabilise the social order. As I will try to show in chapter 6, the attacks on novels and novel-reading in this period were part of the wider opposition to consumerism. In the case of supernatural fictions, the civic humanist objection to luxury commodities in general was supplemented by the enlightenment objection to a form of writing which perpetuated irrational ideas for the sake of affect. Within these complementary frameworks, supernatural fiction figures as the ultimate luxury commodity, produced by an ‘unreal need’ for unreal representations.

But if eighteenth-century Britain saw the growing commercialisation of spirits, it also saw a spiritualisation of commerce; a fundamental chiasmus. While ghost stories were being assimilated by a rationalised market system of publishing in the second half of the eighteenth century, the language of supernaturalism was increasingly employed to justify and universalise the characteristics of market capitalism. Earlier in the century the analogy of the supernatural had been invoked under the influence of civic humanism in a negative way. For instance, in 1720 after the collapse of the South Sea ‘Bubble’ – a speculative scheme on an unprecedented scale and a symbol of the rising power of the ‘monied interest’ – broadsheets and satirical prints drew on the imagery of superstitious belief to express the sense of mysterious, inscrutable causalities at work: the stock-jobbers are conjurors or alchemists, the investors are Gadarene swine, demoniacally possessed, and the master of ceremonies is the Devil in person. Similarly, when in The Fable of the Bees (1714) Bernard Mandeville embraced civic humanism’s negative descrip-
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tion of acquisitiveness and luxury as ‘private vices’ and proposed the paradox that these were the foundation of ‘public benefits,’ he was promptly denounced as an Antichrist. His doctrine that a prosperous economy was the net product of the apparent chaos of selfish passions rather than of disinterested reason, the consequence of the capricious pursuit of ephemeral satisfactions rather than of reflection and self-control, presented the unacceptable picture of a modernity dominated by illusion and fantasy as surely as the superstitious past had been.10

However, gradually a more positive version of the spirituality of the capitalist marketplace began to be put forward. Where its critics had attributed its cultural effects to infernal agency, apologists identified commerce as an order validated by God. In The Elements of Commerce and Theory of Taxes, designed as a textbook for the Prince of Wales, Josiah Tucker argued that the multiplication of ‘artificial needs’ in modern society is entirely creditable – ‘as this System of Commercial Industry is equally the Plan of Providence with the System of Morals, we may rest assured, that both are consistent with each other’. Edmund Burke opposed state intervention to alleviate the food shortages of 1795 on the grounds that ‘it is not in breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the Divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer, or which hangs over us’.11

‘Economic theodicy’ has been introduced as a descriptive label for this hybrid discourse, which managed to retain much of Malthus’s libertarianism while laying claim to the high moral ground previously reserved for proponents of strict moral and economic regulation. It was a formula designed to ‘reinsert’ economic activity in the form of emergent free market capitalism ‘within the sphere of the good’.12 The verbal trappings of providential belief are applied, by a curious twist, to the evolving social science of economics. The mechanisms of commerce are ‘supernaturalised’, attributed to the unsearchable will of God. Even the most outlandish characteristics of the capitalist order are to be read as signs of a guiding intelligence, as are miracles within the schema of religious revelation. While the economic passions are not positive virtues, yet they are justified by the internal checks and balances of a divinely ordained economic order, able to smooth out in moral terms even the most extreme inequalities of wealth without the need for intervention
from secular authorities. The ‘invisible hand’ hypothesised by Adam Smith is the most famous emblem of this eighteenth-century rapprochement. Smith’s *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (1759) proposes a paradox as harsh as anything in Mandeville: luxury, the ‘natural selfishness and rapacity’ of the rich, results in the employment and economic support ‘of all the thousands who they employ in the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires’. Again, ‘private vices’ are condoned for the ‘public benefits’ they bring, but the rough magic of the trickle-down effect is then immediately glossed as the transcendental justice of an ‘invisible hand’: ‘When Providence divided the earth among a few lordly masters, it neither forgot nor abandoned those who seemed to have been left out in the partition.’

What can we deduce from the historical coincidence of the expanding taste for commercial fictions of the supernatural and the project of a supernaturalised theory of capitalism? It may be possible to see in this chiastic relation the roots of the ‘dialectic of fear’ which Franco Moretti has discovered in those mass culture myths of the twentieth century, Frankenstein’s Monster and Count Dracula: ‘The more a work frightens, the more it edifies. The more it humiliates, the more it uplifts. The more it hides, the more it gives the illusion of revealing. It is the fear one needs: the price one pays for coming contentedly to terms with a social body based on irrationality and menace. Who says it is escapist?’ By the beginning of the nineteenth century literary tales of terror were being affirmed as manifestations of an autonomous realm of the aesthetic, detached from the didactic function which had guaranteed the social utility of the realist novel. What could seem more gratuitous, more free of social determinations, than this indulgence in a fantasy of fear? But given the massive scale of the operations by which the culture industry has come to supply this experience, Adorno’s remark on the phenomenon of ‘free time’ seems pertinent: ‘people first inflict upon themselves (and celebrate as a triumph of their own freedom) precisely what society inflicts upon them and what they must learn to enjoy’.

But in the period that concerns us, the assimilative potential of a revived and modernised ghost-story-telling circle was still in question. At this time the literary supernatural still had the power to disturb and, by the very force of the prohibitions against it, to voice otherwise unspeakable truths. Denounced by contemporaries as the
symptom of a regression to Gothic barbarism by way of consumer capitalism, the literature of terror arose in the late eighteenth century as a symptom of and reflection on the modern. To quote Adorno once more:

phantasmagoria comes into being when, under the constraints of its own limitations, modernity’s latest products come close to the archaic. Every step forward is at the same time a step into the remote past. As bourgeois society advances it finds that it needs its own camouflage of illusion simply in order to subsist. For only when so disguised does it venture to look the new in the face. That formula, ‘it sounded so old, and yet was so new,’ is the cypher of a social conjuncture.16